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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 001100

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/17/2018  
TAGS: AJ KDEM PGOV PREL  
SUBJECT: EDITOR SAYS USG DEFENSE FOR FOREIGN BROADCASTS  
MUST BE PRIORITY

REF: A. BAKU 1062  
    B. BAKU 1092  
    C. BAKU 1093

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse, Reasons 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During lunch with the Ambassador, leading independent daily Zerkalo editor Elchin Shikhlinsky characterized efforts to preserve foreign radio broadcasts as a do-or-die moment for Azerbaijan's media. Providing a rather bleak overview for the prospects of free-and-fair media, he predicted that if the government is successful in removing VOA, BBC and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty from the FM airwaves, the few remaining independent media outlets (including Zerkalo) could be threatened. End Summary

¶2. (C) The Ambassador and PAO met with Elchin Shikhlinsky for lunch November 17 to get an assessment of the media situation from one of the most respected and most independent journalists in Azerbaijan. Before the Ambassador had even had a chance to raise the radio issue, Shikhlinsky steered the conversation in that direction, painted the issue as a must-win for those who hope to see free media in the country's future.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador assured the Zerkalo editor that the USG is aware of what is at stake and has made the issue a top priority. Shikhlinsky pointed toward Presidential Administration Chief Mehdiyev as the likely instigator of the campaign against the radios, and said that Radio Liberty (Azadliq) is the real target. Mehdiyev and like-minded members of the government fear that when listeners hear others on talk shows, call-in shows and other for a expressing the same concerns they share, they may become emboldened and uncontrollable. If the threat to take the foreign broadcasters off the air is not reversed, he predicted, the few other independent voices such as Zerkalo are vulnerable. He pointed to the closure and subsequent taming of ANS news broadcasts as a precedent.

¶4. (C) Shikhlinsky also criticized the government's announcement that it will provide 1.3 million dollars in support to media outlets as a means of strengthening the media. He predicted that the funds will eventually be used to prop up only government media. Unless a free-market business model for media is allowed to emerge "one in which businesses can choose freely where to advertise and newspapers can opine freely without fearing retribution against their advertisers" the future of the media is uncertain. Noting that Zerkalo barely meets its 60,000 dollar-per-month operating costs with advertising, Shikhlinsky said it is impossible to make long-term investments or plans because the future is so uncertain.

¶5. (C) Media outlets with open or shadow government support have been able to attract many of the most able journalists in recent years, robbing the few independent journals of experienced reporters and editors. Noting that government-backed APA news agency is paying cub reporters 600 AZN per month, when Zerkalo and Trend pay a third to half

that sum due to their limited economic horizons, he said young people, even the most idealistic, are choosing to take care of themselves and their families rather than suffer.

¶6. (C) Comment: Shikhinsky's concerns were predictable and echoed sentiments the Embassy has been hearing from journalists over the past two weeks. His pessimism as regards the overall media environment underscores the importance of fighting for independent radio, both privately and publicly. He agreed with our assessment that the government is likely to back down on its threat to take the radios off the air by January, but his conviction that the administration's long-term goal is to marginalize completely independent voices was sobering.

DERSE